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Not Just Any Satirical Magazine

Satire is a type of comedy that thrives no matter what time period it’s in. Since the dawn of the printing press people not only printed the current happenings but also have brought us comedy in form of satirical comics and articles. One of the first satirical magazines that came out was the Harvard lampoon. This magazine gave the audience witty but yet intellectual comedy in its articles. Nearly one hundred years passes by since the first issue of this magazine and one of its writers at the time begins to sprout an idea for another satirical magazine but not just any satirical magazine…The National Lampoon.

Writing for The National Lampoon started in 1970 when founders Doug Kenney and Henry Beard started to write separate articles from the Harvard lampoon. The satire and comedy was still in the writing but it was much more raunchy and up to date with what is happening in the world during that time. Locker says, during its relatively brief heyday from its launch in 1970 until the mid-70s when Kenney and Beard took advantage of a buy-out clause in their contracts, the magazine left an indelible mark on modern comedy. National Lampoon has had many controversial yet humorous cover art for almost all of its issues. The most famous of them is a picture of a dog with a gun held up to its head with the caption reading, “ If you don’t buy this magazine, we’ll kill this dog” (Simmons) Obviously people now a days would be outraged with this cover. After cementing their brand of comedy to America during the early seventies, society looked at the cover as just a ploy to make readers buy the issue. Surprisingly the marketing tactic worked like a charm. “The most famous *Lampoon* cover gag, this was selected by ASME as the seventh-greatest magazine cover of the last 40 years. This issue is the most coveted and collectible of all the National Lampoon's issues.” (Simmons) “Another controversial cover depicted a baby within a blender along with a satanic finger that seems to be on the pulse button.” (Krassner) After this issue was published many of the magazine’s sponsors felt the need to drop The National Lampoon and stop advertising in future issues of the magazine. After gathering this information one can conclude that The National Lampoon is not just another Satire Magazine but it was the satire magazine that broke the boundaries of comedy and satire.

The reason so many people thought that The National Lampoon was at its best before the year 1975 is because by then the company started to branch out by spreading their brand of comedy through radio and through movies. Simmons tells, by 1975 The National Lampoon landed writers such as Reiss and Al Jean who went on to be writers for the hit cartoon sitcom *The Simpsons*. Simmons also says The National Lampoon also had big name stars that got their start by writing for the magazine. He says such stars included Gilda Radner, Bill Murray and John Belushi. He also says The National Lampoon's most successful sales period was 1973–75. Its national circulation peaked at 1,000,096 copies sold of the October 1974 "Pubescence issue. The 1974 monthly average was 830,000, which was also a peak.

Eventually when the time came to make films such as Animal House stars like Belushi focused their writing on the film and not on the magazine. Locker tells along with films The National Lampoon came out with the radio show called, *The National Lampoon Radio hour*. The show consisted of stars like John Belushi, Bill Murray, Gilda Radner and Chevy Chase performing comical sketches. She also explains that The National Lampoon was very popular during the branching out period but its magazine that started the comedy became less funny due to the lack of work put in by the people who made the magazine genuinely funny.

The National Lampoon was better known from its movies such as “Caddy Shack” and “Animal House” After these films came out it put a lot of pressure on Doug Kenney to produce bigger and better movies. Karp tells that the pressure got the better of Kenney and he went on a drug binge. He says that Kenney’s drug of choice was cocaine, which was a popular drug at that time. He also says Kenney fled to Hawaii in hope that he would find peace and tranquility away from the stress of making the next big Hollywood comedy. “The comic talent behind NationalLampoon magazine and the long-lived comic romps Caddyshack and AnimalHouse lived a wild life... and a short one. Doug Kenney died in August 1980 after a fall from a cliff in Hawaii. He was just 33.” (Karp) After Kenney’s mysterious death The National Lampoon still came out with issue nearly every week. Each edition seemed to be less funny as it came out. All the original writers went on to bigger things such as writing for shows like The Simpsons, Saturday Night Live and The Dailey Show. Karp gives a few more notable movies came out such as National Lampoon’s Family Vacation, Christmas Vacation and European vacation but it seemed like all the ground breaking had been done with comedy and all that was left of The National Lampoon was the legacy it tried to carry on with its dying magazine.

Sales were dwindling fast by 1997 and the National Lampoon published its last issue of its magazine in November 1998. A man by the name James Jimirro who is the chief executive of J2 communications los angels based video producer and distributor bought The National Lampoon. (Gubernick) J2 productions currently runs the operation of the website, [www.nationallampoon.com](http://www.nationallampoon.com). The website still holds some reminisce of satire that was once used back in the heyday of the magazine but still doesn’t have that genuine, controversial, perverted and some what funniness that the magazine also had. It’s merely just a shell of what the magazine used to be. The documentary “Drunk Stoned Brilliant Dead: The Story of the The National Lampoon came out in 2015 and was shown at the Sundance Film Festival. The script, written by Tirola and Mark Monroe, covers the period from the 1970s to the 1990s when National Lampoon pushed the limits of taste and acceptability. (McNary) After this documentary came out for the National Lampoon there has been a spike in interest for the magazine that was around forty years ago. All that there is left of The National lampoon is the legacy that it left on the world of comedy and a website that is just a mere shell of what the magazine once was.

The National Lampoon, I think is a very interesting magazine. I had no knowledge of the magazine until I watched the documentary, *Drunk Stoned Brilliant and Dead*. I was very entranced with how the magazine came to be and see how comedy idols that I look up to like Chevy Chase and John Belushi got their start in Comedy. It seemed like it was all thanks to The National Lampoon. I tend gravitate towards satirical articles and comedies on TV and that kind of comedy is what The National Lampoon had all along. Though the magazine was before my time I still find their comedy quite funny. This made me think. I had thought, if the magazine The National Lampoon were still around would people take the time to read some of their articles. So I preformed an experiment. I printed out one of the most popular articles to come out of the magazine back in its heyday and had some people around my age read the article and answer some questions that I had made up. For example, have you ever heard of The National Lampoon and how did the article make you feel? Out of the five people I had take the questionnaire and read the article only one knew of the name The National Lampoon but only by the movies the donned the name like National Lampoon’s Family Vacation. Every one of the participants who read the article found the comedy within to be funny and or enjoyable. One of the last questions that I had for the participants was, would you take the time to read more articles form The National Lampoon on your own? Every one of the participants said yes, but only if it was convenient by means of Internet or on a mobile app.

After analyzing the results I gathered from the participants I quickly realized that almost all the comedy that we as a society get nowadays come form either the television or the Internet. We solely rely on convenience even when it comes to making us laugh. I wanted to know if the comedy that the magazine could hold up to my generation’s standards and it did. After forty years the articles that were written back then still made people my age laugh. In age that we live in convenience dominates all and back then the closes thing to convenience was picking up a magazine and reading about what’s happening in the world. The National Lampoon brought comedy to the world around us by making historically important events comedic. The website that I have found for the National Lampoon still produces articles that give satire to current events that happening now such as the presidential election. The comedy in the articles produced today compared to the comedy produced back in 1973 is much less perverted and more politically correct.

In world ruled by regulations on media and political correctness it would be hard to get away with what The National Lampoon did back when they were first starting the magazine. A couple of the participants added that the comedy that read from the article I gave them had a certain type of satire that other sites such as The Onion have now. This shows that people my age know about this comedy because The National Lampoon’s predecessors such as The Onion and SNL have used their type of comedy. Many of the successful shows such as the Dailey Show and SNL and websites like The Onion that are out right now have spawned from The National Lampoon. This tells me that the satire of The National Lampoon still lives on today.

I also had one more question why did J2 productions buy a dying franchise such as The National. I found that James Jimirro had a limited amount of monet to work with the franchise to resurrect it. Jimirro had 4.8 million in the bank and the estimated cost to “revamp” the franchise would cost around 4.5 million. He was metaphorically putting all of his chips on black. (Black being the franchise that is The National Lampoon.)

After its purchase by J2 Communications in 1991, the National Lampoon franchise became predominately a name-licensing company, in which the company was paid for use of its brand on titles such as National Lampoons Senior Trip, Dorm Daze, Black Ball and Barely Legal. Although this enterprise salvaged the company from bankruptcy, some believe it damaged the reputation of National Lampoon as a source of respected comedy. When the company was purchased from J2 Communications, this practice was eventually discontinued in 2007, with the last "licensed" film being TV: The Movie starring Steve-O. (Newman)

After finding this information out it seems to me that the franchise did get resurrected but not in the right way like it was intended to. The films that were made after the buy out amounted to nothing profitability wise. They definitely carry the right legacy that the magazine and the writers who once worked there left. Some franchises such as the National Lampoon will never see the right reboot it needs for this generation because it seems like even though we love the comedy that once was but we only want to see it if its convenient and politically correct.

I love the fact that The National Lampoon went against the grain when it came to creating humor back then and the language that they used in every issue helped them to drive their points to make dark situations seem witty and intelligent. Today we still appreciate that comedy that was portrayed in The National Lampoon forty years ago but it looks like it’s already too late for a comeback for this old franchise.

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